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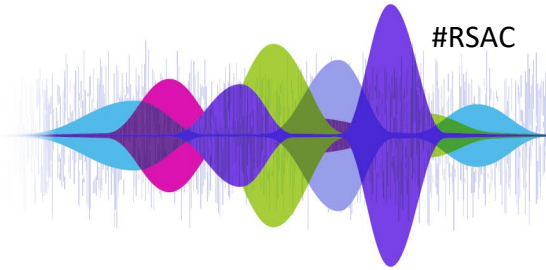
SESSION ID: ICWD-T09

Mental Health In Cybersecurity: Balancing the Scales

Patrick Kelley

CEO
Critical Path Security / Leargas Security
https://www.linkedin.com/in/pmkelley/



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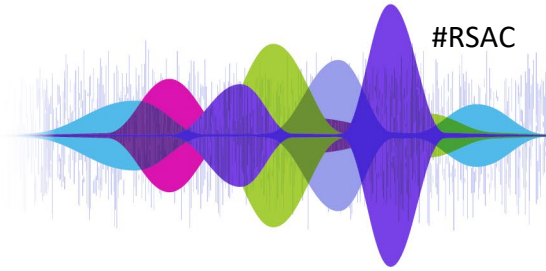
THE PRESSURE COOKER

THE PRESSURE COOKER

- We aren't printing t-shirts over here. This is hard. There's no "clock out" time.
- We're understaffed and under-resourced. Then, RIF'd.
- We're not paranoid. Everyone is out to get us. "I am getting the pig. -Red"
- "Digital Transformation" is killing us.

THE PRESSURE COOKER

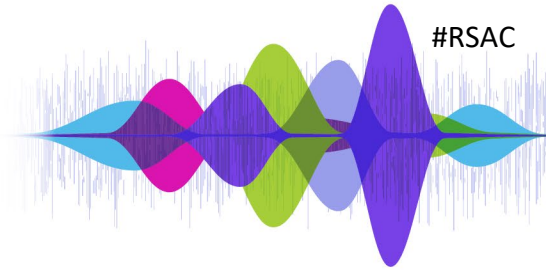


- **Prevalence of Burnout:** The relentless pace of work, including tasks like Patch Tuesday, and the complexity of managing hybrid and remote workforces contribute to this crisis.

- **Systemic Nature:** The industry faces unique stressors that can lead to high levels of isolation and stress, particularly for CISOs.

- **Lack of Support:** There is a lack of psychological safety, where vulnerability and sharing feelings are not commonly encouraged.

NEVER WASTE A GOOD CRISIS



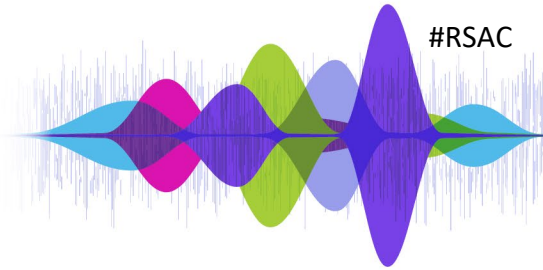
A CISO once shared with me that late one night, as he sat at his desk, exhausted and frustrated from years of advocating for better cybersecurity measures, only to be met with indifference.

Desperate, he whispered a prayer for a significant breach, hoping it would finally prompt the board to take action and provide the needed resources.

He closed in stating that he didn't know how to convey what "winning" looked like to the organization.

They hadn't been significantly impacted, but he knew he was burning his team out in the prevention of a breach.

IS THIS YOU?



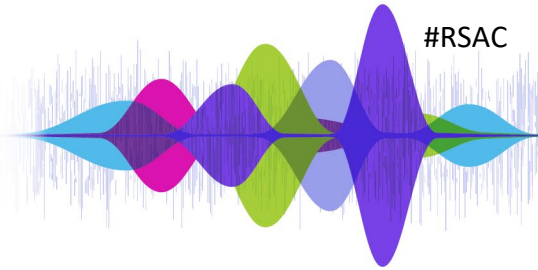
Many professionals carry the weight of burnout, believing they alone are responsible for causing it.

Wrong.

Burnout isn't a reflection of your weakness. It's not something you can overcome with sheer willpower or working harder.

Burnout is a shared responsibility, and real change starts with creating conditions that allow people to thrive.

HOW IS THIS IMPACTING FINANCE?



- **Increased turnover costs:** Cybersecurity professionals are burning out faster due to high workloads. Recruiting and training new hires costs **1.5-2x their annual salary**.

- **Lost productivity:** Understaffed teams lead to slower incident response, increasing downtime costs. The average cost of a **critical infrastructure cyberattack** is **$4.82M** .

- **Cyber insurance premium hikes:** Burnout increases the likelihood of human error, leading to **higher claims and premium increases of 25-40% annually**.

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THE ACCIDENTAL CISO

THE ACCIDENTAL CISO

- Many CISOs and Cybersecurity people never intended to be one. It just... happened.
- Many CISOs and Cybersecurity people are working multiple positions and roles.
- Many CISOS and Cybersecurity people feel entirely over their head. They never really get past it.

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IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Are you even good enough to have it? - Sarcasm

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IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Imposter Syndrome refers to an internal psychological pattern where an individual doubts their accomplishments and has a persistent fear of being exposed as a "fraud," despite external evidence of their competence.

It is one of the most significant syndromes associated with Cybersecurity.

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THE EVOLUTION

UNDERSTANDING THE CYCLE

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THE EVOLUTION

Initial Drive: Cybersecurity professionals often start with a strong drive to succeed, fueled by a desire to prove their capabilities, and achieve recognition.

Imposter Syndrome: As they advance, many experience Imposter Syndrome, doubting, their abilities despite evidence of their competence due to the rapid change in the industry.

THE EVOLUTION

Continual Drive: The need to constantly prove themselves, due to the additional roles being placed on them, they push hard, which pushes professionals past their limits.

Burnout: Prolonged stress can lead to burnout, validating the negative beliefs and insecurities they've carried, and potentially leading to a cycle of self-doubt and further burnout.

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IT'S MORE COMMON THAN YOU THINK

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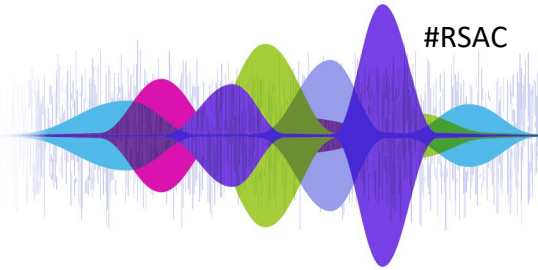


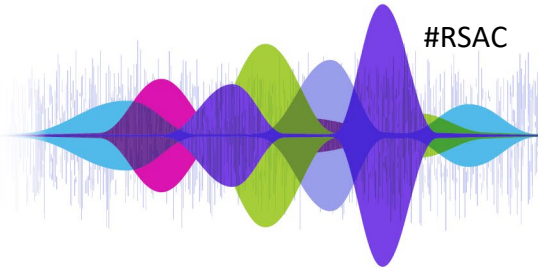
Natalie Portman

"When I got into Harvard, I felt like there had been some mistake, that I wasn't smart enough to be in this company, that every time I opened my mouth, I would have to prove that I wasn't just a dumb actress."

Maya Angelou

“I have written 11 books, but each time I think, 'Uh-oh, they’re going to find out now. I’ve run a game on everybody, and they’re going to find me out.'"

IT'S MORE COMMON THAN YOU THINK



Tom Hanks

"No matter what we've done, there comes a point where you think, 'How did I get here? When are they going to discover that I am, in fact, a fraud and take everything away from me?'"

Patrick Kelley (Me)

I own two successful cybersecurity companies. I am a Distinguished Guest Lecturer at multiple Universities. Each day, I start with a healthy dose of imposter syndrome. I'm currently speaking to you at RSAC, which any normal person would consider a huge success.

Cognitive Distortion, unchecked, will steal your happiness.

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BUTTERFLY EFFECT

CHAOS THEORY

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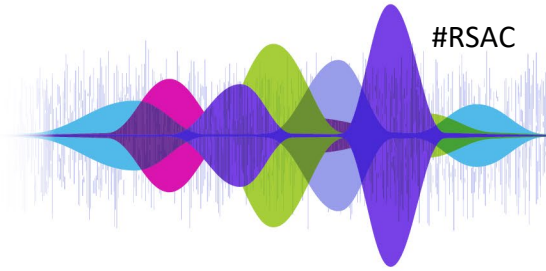
THEY AREN'T JUST BLOWING UP SECURITY



- The pressure on security teams affects not just cybersecurity but also compliance, financial stability, and operational continuity.
- Accidental CISOs often lack the training or resources to handle these responsibilities.
- Cybersecurity challenges in organizations aren’t just technical—they involve human psychology, risk management, and leadership.

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The Trauma-Burnout Connection

The Silent Threat: Recognizing Trauma in Cybersecurity Professionals

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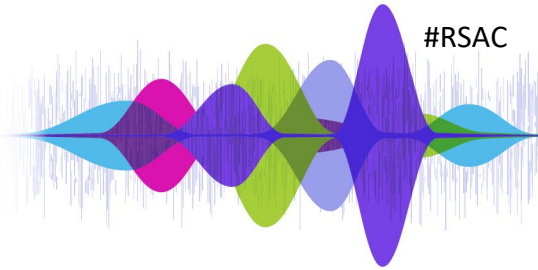
UNDERSTAND TRAUMA & ITS IMPACT



- CPTSD - Develops from prolonged stress (e.g., relentless pressure in cybersecurity).
- Chronic stress can lead to PTSD-like symptoms, exacerbating burnout.
- Many professionals have pre-existing trauma, which cybersecurity work can intensify.

STRENGTHS & VULNERABILITIES

Skill Developed Through Trauma	Benefit	Burnout Risk
Hypervigilance	Strong Threat Detection	Constant Anxiety, Difficulty Relaxing
Emotional Regulation	Maintains Composure In Stress	Suppresses Emotions, Leading To Exhaustion
Pattern Recognition	Identifying Anomalies	Mental Fatigue From Overanalyzing Threats
Resilience & Adaptability	Thrives Under Pressure	Pushing Too Hard, Neglecting Self-Care

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CURRENT COPING MECHANISMS

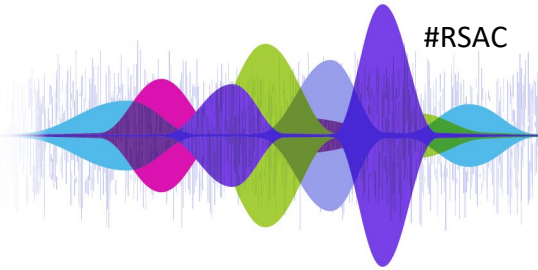
WE AREN'T DOING A GREAT JOB

The stress most cyber professionals are under includes work hours, role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload, and more.

Nearly every Slack team associated with Cyber has a channel called “Drink” or “The Bar”. Few have one for "Mental Health".

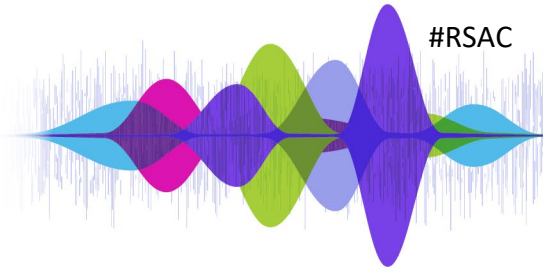
2 in 5 CISOs report abusing or excessively drinking multiple nights per week to offset stress.

WHAT IS YOUR COPING MECHANISM?



"Are these coping methods still working for me, or am I working for them?"

HOW CAN WE BETTER COPE?



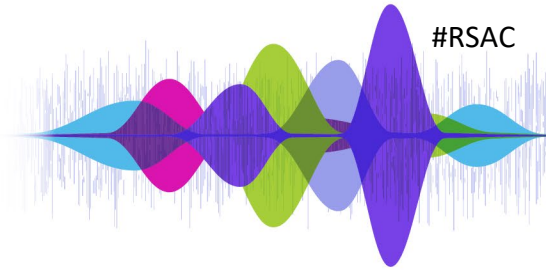
Mandatory Fun: "Unlimited PTO" doesn't work. PTO that rolls over doesn't work. PTO is meant to provide time to recover.

An efficient team is a well-rested team.

Journaling: Often, I use mirror and glass crayons to get my thoughts out of my head.

This stops the “loop”, which allows me to let go and relax.

HOW CAN WE BETTER COPE?



Meditation: Master the hardest thing you'll personally do. Sit still. It seems easy, but most of us can't.

Social Support: Building and maintaining relationships with friends, family, or support groups can provide emotional support and a sense of belonging.

Get Professional Help: There is no shame in asking for professional help.

I do.

HOW CAN WE BETTER COPE?

Asking for help is the last time you'll have to fight alone.

ASK!

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MASLACH BURNOUT INVENTORY

MASLACH BURNOUT INVENTORY

Versions of the MBI

The inventory comes in several forms, tailored to different professions:

- **MBI-CS (Cybersecurity Survey:): For cybersecurity operators. *New!***
- MBI-HSS (Human Services Survey): For healthcare workers and those in human services roles.
- MBI-GS (General Survey): For employees in other industries outside of healthcare and education.

MASLACH BURNOUT INVENTORY

Format

The MBI consists of 22 items rated on a 7-point frequency scale, ranging from 0 ("Never") to 6 ("Every day").

Purpose

- Identify burnout levels and contributing factors.
- Inform interventions to reduce stress and improve workplace well-being.
- Track changes in burnout over time.

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CALCULATIONS / COST

BURNOUT COST CALCULATOR

Burnout Cost Factors	Value
Number of Employees	50
Turnover Rate Due to Burnout (%)	10%
Average Salary per Employee ($)	$120,000
Replacement Cost Factor (as % of Salary)	100%
Productivity Loss Due to Burnout (%)	20%
Additional Sick Days per Burnt-out Employee	$5
Average Mental Health Claim per Employee ($)	$2,000

Calculated Costs	Value
Turnover Cost ($)	$600,000
Lost Productivity Cost ($)	$1,000,000
Absenteeism Cost ($)	$60,000
Healthcare Cost ($)	$20,000
Total Estimated Burnout Cost ($)	$1,680,000

MASLACH BURNOUT INVENTORY

Tools:

MBI-CS Training
MBI-CS Inventory
MBI-CS Administration Instruction Package
MBI-CS Burnout Calculator
MBI-CS Burnout Cost Calculator

Download:

https://github.com/LeargasSecurity/MBI-CS

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NEXT STEPS

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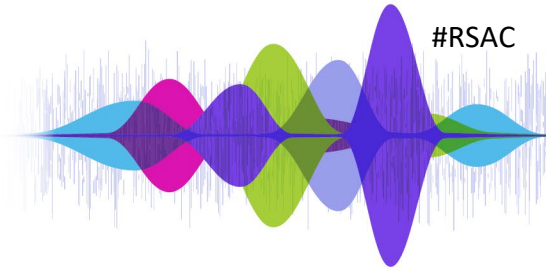
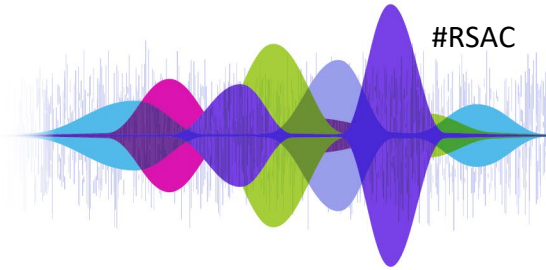
Next Steps



- **Encourage Open Conversations**
  Promote and engage in discussions about mental health within cybersecurity teams to reduce stigma.
- **Normalize Self-Care Practices**
  Encourage and engage in journaling, mindfulness, and other coping mechanisms to help manage daily stress.
- **Promote Work-Life Boundaries**
  Normalized the importance of stepping away, and take PTO seriously, and maintain boundaries.

A boundary is the distance required to love yourself and something or someone else at the same time.



Next Steps

The mind and its established behaviors are much like a river. Over the years, it wears a path in the ground and continually follows it.

Rerouting a river requires continuously packing dirt along the new banks because the water will naturally wish to follow its old path, continually fighting back against the boundaries.

Your mind, like a river, does not necessarily want to change. It is not the easiest path.

You must persistently reinforce those boundaries to guide it along a new course.

Be patient with yourself.

RESOURCES

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Phone: 1-800-273-8255 (TALK)

Text: 988

Website: suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

Phone: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

Website: samhsa.gov

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For More Information:

Patrick Kelley

patrick.kelley@leargassecurity.com